

STATEMENT OF THE PARENTS OF BUENA REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL WRESTLER ANDREW JOHNSON

Buena, NJ (December 24, 2018) – Charles and Rosa Johnson, the parents of 16-year-old Buena Regional High School wrestler Andrew Johnson, who last week was unexpectedly forced by a referee to have his dreadlocks cut or forfeit his match, today expressed immense, heartfelt gratitude for the overwhelming show of support for their son. Andrew has been deeply moved by the thunderous outpouring of unsolicited support--including from an Olympic wrestler, leading civil rights advocates, and elected officials--after the shocking pre-match ultimatum.



**Andrew Johnson—Photo
Courtesy of the Johnson Family**

Dominic A. Speziali, Esq., of the J. Fine Law Group, the family's attorney, said that they are awaiting the results of an inquiry by the N.J. Division of Civil Rights and that the referee's conduct appears more egregious as additional information comes to light.

Mr. Speziali stated, "The scholastic wrestling rules clearly state that referees are to inspect wrestlers' appearance and determine any rules violations prior to the start of the meet, typically during weigh-ins. The referee here was late to the meet and missed weigh-ins. When he did evaluate Andrew, he failed to raise any issues with the length of his hair or the need to wear a head covering."

He added that the referee later informed Nate Johnson, Andrew's younger brother and teammate, that they would both need to wear a head covering or face disqualification.

As Andrew took to the mat to start his match, the referee examined and rejected the head covering he was wearing. In prior matches at a tournament the weekend before, Andrew was permitted to wrestle without issue, a fact that his coaches conveyed to the referee when pleading on his behalf. Andrew then requested he be allowed to push his hair back as he did the weekend prior, but the referee again refused because "it wasn't in its natural state," referring to the dreadlocks as "braids."

Andrew was visibly shaken after he and his coaches made every effort to satisfy the referee short of having his hair cut. But, as captured on video, the unyielding referee gave Andrew 90 seconds to either forfeit his match or cut his hair. Under duress but without any influence from the coaching staff or the athletic trainer, Andrew decided to have his hair cut rather than forfeit the match.

“As the trainer is cutting Andrew’s hair in the middle of the gym, the referee is behind them directing her to keep cutting until he was satisfied with the length,” Speziali said.

Despite the referee’s outrageous conduct, Andrew and his family remain committed to Buena’s wrestling program, the athletic trainer, and his coaches, who have coached him since he was 5 years old.



The Johnson Family (from L to R): Matt, Rosa, Andrew, Nate, Cami, and Charles.
Photo courtesy of the Johnson Family.

“As this matter is further investigated, the family wants to be clear that they are supportive of Andrew’s coaches and the team’s athletic trainer,” Speziali emphasized. “The blame here rests primarily with the referee and those that permitted him to continue in that role despite clear evidence of what should be a disqualifying race-related transgression.”

Charles and Rosa Johnson added, “Wrestling has taught Andrew to be resilient in the face of adversity. As we move forward, we are comforted by both the strength of Andrew’s character and the support he’s received from the community. We will do all that we can to make sure that no student-athlete is forced to endure what Andrew experienced.”

We request that the public and media respect the family's privacy at this time.

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